John Nerone, *The Media and Public Life: A History.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015.

Writing this review at the close of 2016, it is impossible to ignore some momentous developments: the Brexit vote in the UK which has so deeply unsettled the European Union and the British constitutional order; the election of Donald Trump as President of the US and the accompanying coarsening of public discourse; the evident revolt against 'elites' in many states that curiously leave other establishment figures unscathed; the disputed use of cyber warfare by Russia in the US election campaign and the apparent deployment of Russian political finance in support of the political right elsewhere in Europe, most notably in France; the crystallisation of various forms of nationalistic 'populism', all of which – despite their differences - share the 'othering' of those regarded as aliens in the national body politic; the increased visibility and confidence of neo-Nazism in a number of democratic states, raising questions about whether history ever does or could provide us with imperative lessons.

At a transnational level, we might also note the intensifying information cold war between Russia and some western democracies, played out through the 'legacy' media of radio and television. Complicating this has been the increased fragmentation of mainstream media consumption coupled with the impact of social media in the formation of virtual and real communities of belief and action. In this mix, the growing crisis of public service media has thrown up a further challenge to the conduct of civil public debate about matters of common interest. No surprise then, that the international word of the year, so the Oxford Dictionaries tell us, is 'post-truth', defined as 'an adjective relating to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than emotional appeals' (English Oxford Living Dictionaries 2016).

While this term has its limits, not least in suggesting that the unvarnished truth has previously prevailed in the public domain, its rise to prominence as a contemporary slogan has signalled a perception of change both in how the public domain is constituted and in the conduct of major protagonists in the media-political sphere. This is one pressing context in which to consider John Nerone's stimulating historical analysis. There could hardly be a more apposite moment for us to interrogate the role of media and journalism in shaping the elusive ideal of what he calls 'public intelligence'. Nerone's work sets out to provide a long view of successive phases in the development of media and their relations to the constitution of publics. The historicising of different configurations of media and publics reminds us – as if we needed it today – that what we might assume to be the settled norms of professionalised journalism and the purposes of democratic discourse are subject to processes of change and therefore highly contingent and inherently contestable.

Underpinning Nerone's book is the view that we can best understand the historical evolution of journalism and media by considering the kinds of networks of relations in which these are implicated. This approach leads him to construct several models that are presented in successive chapters, to which we shall turn below. But this is not a story of the succession of self-contained ideal types but rather a messier reality in which particular configurations of media, technologies, politics and economics may predominate, often in coexistence with earlier forms.

Nerone's book is above all a disquisition on the US experience by a scholar deeply rooted in American political and constitutional history, along with his wide and deep knowledge of media. It also offers well informed episodic analyses of other countries – most notably, early-modern and modern England (the author does not touch on related developments in Scotland which were closely related to its own nation-formation within the Great British state). There are also illuminating passages on France and Germany, and occasional illustrations from other European countries such as Italy and The Netherlands. But the reader can be in no doubt that the readership most directly addressed is American in a text that is both pedagogic in the best possible way and, at the same time, sufficiently challenging to engage the specialist researcher and scholar. Given the pivotal significance of US cultural production for the world, it is a story that should interest us all.

The author begins by analysing what he calls 'the printer's newspaper' and the emergence of a national public sphere. In this regard, he offers a lively history of the early formation of the printed press, which will be largely familiar to experts in this subject-matter. One major line of argument concerns the transfer of English models (via people, practices and ideas) to the British colonies in north America and to demonstrate how these eventually took their own distinctive course in media forms and occupations. The early public sphere, it is plausibly argued, was in effect a restricted one for the use of political elites. Nerone is particularly good at showing the dense networks established by the early printers, their exchanges, and later, after the US Declaration of Independence (1776) in illustrating how, by 1830 or so, a wider national reading public was being constituted by what now had become the 'editor's newspaper', operating in a distinctively partisan public sphere in line with the emergent modern party system. The interconnection of party and press is particularly well captured. Moreover, in ways that recall Harold Innis's work, the infrastructural conditions for the development of the press are specified: the construction of roads, the railroads, the telegraph, and crucially, the post.

It is these wider preconditions that enabled the formation of the 'commercial public sphere' as the nineteenth century proceeded, one in which a cheap popular press developed using ever more sophisticated forms of advertising, engaging in the commodification of readerships and drawing on markets for news services. While noting that partisanship by no means disappeared, Nerone argues that commercialisation resulted in the rapid development of mass-circulation media which diffused popular culture and in which the 'human interest story' came into its own. It is also the point at which major news centres began to develop in the key cities of the USA, notably New York. This maturing business model also began to formalise the roles of reporters and correspondents and engendered the increasing complexity of distinct editorial, production and marketing functions in the press.

The author moves on to consider what he calls 'industrial media', which clearly depended on the accelerated mechanisation of the entire range of processes and technologies involved in the production and distribution of the press. It was a phase in which media businesses' internal division of labour ramified, printing technologies advanced, the dominant factory system imposed time-discipline on the labour force and when the media market itself became more complex, given the appearance of wire services, syndicated features, and advertising agencies.

Nerone offers some astute observations about the professionalisation of journalism by the late nineteenth century. By the 1880s, this new 'ism' was being constituted, he suggests, by 'the set of ideas and values that grew up around professionalizing news practices. News organizations sought to guarantee the public that they deserved credibility even as they struggled with government and their owners for independence and autonomy' (p.132). The popular 'new journalism' that subsequently emerged in the USA was part of a trend also evident in Britain and France and elsewhere in Europe and increasingly engaged mass publics. One of its distinct features (in the US and Britain) was evidence-based 'muckraking' – the critique of powerful institutions by way of exposés. Here, Nerone sets the stage for a discussion of what he calls 'the expert observation of the real' which was 'supposed to allow ordinary citizens to make informed decisions as voters' (p.142).

This is one of the most interesting parts of the book. In the present 'post-truth' climate it is especially pertinent to assessment of the attack presently occurring on the value in principle of evidence and expertise in the public domain, whatever the routine shortcomings of most journalism may be. Nerone devotes an entire chapter to what he calls the 'expert public sphere'. He writes about the policy commentator Walter Lippmann's post-World War I pessimistic take on the capacity of the public to be the most apt interpreter of emerging institutional complexity. Lippman crowned journalism with the key role of sense-making for the generality. There have been successive takes on this position, with Robert Merton invoking the legitimacy of 'specialised competence' after World War II and in our own time, advocacy of the need for journalism to speak truth to power by Michael Schudson. Of course, all of these postures rely on assumptions about the importance of gathering evidence. Aside from tracing the changing self-image of journalism, this part of Nerone's book is especially good at educing the ostensible 'scientisation' of journalism by way of the development of public opinion polling and its uses in reporting, the rise of the journalism school as a credentialising factory, and the consolidation of the doctrine of 'objectivity' as a legitimation of practice. Such professionalising tendencies reached their apogee, Nerone contends, with the post-World War II moment of 'high modernism' (in Dan Hallin's phrase). The Anglo-American model – rooted in the victorious states - was then taken by its adherents to be the modal approach for the world, a particularly potent claim as the Cold War rapidly set in and decolonisation gathered pace. However, as all who have followed decades of debates in UNESCO will know, this primacy was always contested, and remains so.

Nerone's case is that the high modernist model has become increasingly passé. This takes us back to our entry point, where present-day conditions outlined at the start of this review become especially pertinent to the argument. The relations between what we have now – what Nerone terms 'the late modern press', digital media and a Castellsian network public – are presented as a story of disruption and uncertainty, which is indeed the case. The disaggregation of audiences and the complexity of how content circulates via digital media have created new conditions and a new kind of playground for political actors. In line with what has become especially evident of late, Nerone picks up on the widespread loss of public trust both in the press and political institutions. If the apparent abundance of information afforded by digitisation is in fact delusory this is due to at least two distinct (but related) conditions. First, on the supply side, the weakening of journalistic interpretation and professional control over a general

public. And second, on the demand side, what Nerone sees as the loss of collective public engagement.

It is not surprising that in his conclusion the author asks whether the ideal of an 'intelligent supervising public' is still possible. Nerone details what he sees as far-reaching failures by media in recent decades to engage with the needs of the working class, to deal effectively with questions of race and ethnicity, to analyse climate change, to engage honestly with the Iraq debacle and other major conflicts, and aside from a few organisations and outstanding individuals, to offer an adequate response for the public to get to grips with growing state and corporate surveillance. He laments the prevalence of what he now discerns as our weak social ties and the intense grip on us all of what Raymond Williams (1974) termed 'mobile privatisation' – now afforded more mobility than Williams ever imagined. It is at this point, though, that hope triumphs over analysis. 'The network public', argues Nerone, 'needs something to compensate for its tendency to fragmentation and evanescence. Journalism redefined might answer this need' (p.230). This is a vague conjecture, and the author can only wonder in passing as to how this might come about. We ourselves might ask whether the capacity to reinvent a mass, transnational mode of address – Nerone's proposed antidote to the decline of public intelligence – is actually feasible. We shall need to specify how both the normative reconstruction of the public sphere and the related invention of innovative practices in journalism might be at the heart of a new agenda in transitional times.

References

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